

The American Dream and Its Disillusionment in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of the American Dream as portrayed in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* through the characters of Jay Gatsby, George Wilson, and Myrtle Wilson. Gatsby embodies the quintessential American ideal that success can be achieved regardless of one's origins. Yet, Fitzgerald exposes the contradictions inherent in this dream—between idealism and materialism, morality and corruption, and beauty and decay. Set against the backdrop of the “Jazz Age,” the novel reflects a society intoxicated by wealth, desire, and moral disintegration. Gatsby's relentless pursuit of success and love becomes a tragic allegory for the unattainable promises of the American Dream. The study also situates *The Great Gatsby* within the context of the “Lost Generation” writers, highlighting its modernist narrative techniques—fragmented structure, shifting perspectives, and ironic tone—that reveal Fitzgerald's profound critique of post-war American materialism. Ultimately, the paper argues that Gatsby's rise and fall symbolize the collapse of the American ideal, transforming the novel into a parable about the inevitable failure of dreams corrupted by greed and illusion.

Keywords

American Dream; F. Scott Fitzgerald; *The Great Gatsby*; Jazz Age; materialism; moral disillusionment; modernism; Lost Generation; success; tragedy.

1. Introduction: The Writers of the “Lost Generation”

Francis Scott Fitzgerald (1896–1940) was one of the most prominent representatives of the “Lost Generation,” a group of American writers disillusioned by the aftermath of World

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War I. This generation emerged as a cultural and psychological response to the collapse of pre-war values, the moral vacuum of the 1920s, and the pervasive influence of materialism. Alongside Ernest Hemingway and E. E. Cummings, Fitzgerald captured the essence of a society seeking meaning amidst the chaos of post-war prosperity and prohibition.

The “Jazz Age,” as Fitzgerald himself famously coined it, was marked by both exuberance and despair. The optimism of the American Dream—rooted in the ideals of democracy, opportunity, and personal freedom—was replaced by the worship of wealth and superficial success. The war had profoundly affected American consciousness, shaking faith in human progress and exposing the fragility of moral values. For Fitzgerald, this transformation offered fertile ground for artistic exploration. His fiction became both a celebration and a critique of the glittering yet hollow world that defined 1920s America.

As Radeljković notes, Fitzgerald “liked money, for him money was the means by which he could attain the romantic, alluring life of rich people, witty and beautiful women” (52). Yet, this attraction to wealth was coupled with an acute awareness of its corrupting influence. His novels thus mirror the tension between aspiration and decay, idealism and disillusionment, that underpins the American experience.

2. The Great Gatsby and the “Jazz Age”

The Great Gatsby (1925) serves as Fitzgerald’s most enduring exploration of the American Dream’s moral bankruptcy. The novel portrays a generation intoxicated by luxury, yearning for happiness through material achievement. The wealthy elite—personified by Tom and Daisy Buchanan—live in moral apathy, while Gatsby, the self-made millionaire, embodies both the dream’s allure and its destruction.

Fitzgerald constructs the novel’s moral framework through the eyes of the narrator, Nick Carraway, whose detached yet reflective perspective allows readers to perceive both the glamour and the emptiness of the world he observes. Through Nick’s judgment—“They’re a rotten crowd... You’re worth the whole damn bunch put together” (Fitzgerald, 160)—the author’s admiration for Gatsby’s idealism contrasts sharply with his condemnation of social hypocrisy.

The novel’s structure exemplifies modernist experimentation. Fitzgerald abandons linear narration, employing retrospection and cinematic fragmentation to mirror the disjointed nature of memory and illusion. Each chapter functions as a piece of a narrative puzzle, revealing fragments of Gatsby’s past until the full tragedy unfolds. This technique underscores the theme of unattainable dreams and the futility of human striving.

3. The American Dream as the Thematic Core of *The Great Gatsby*

The American Dream—the belief that success is attainable through hard work and ambition regardless of background—forms the novel’s thematic foundation. Jay Gatsby, George Wilson, and Myrtle Wilson represent different manifestations of this dream. Gatsby’s reinvention of himself from James Gatz into a wealthy socialite encapsulates the ideal’s seductive promise, while Myrtle and George embody its despairing underside—the futile attempts of the lower class to ascend the social ladder.

In a symbolic passage near the novel's end, Fitzgerald universalizes Gatsby's struggle:

"And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes..." (*The Great Gatsby*, 187).

Here, the author connects Gatsby's personal dream to the collective myth of American beginnings—the hope of discovery and renewal—only to reveal its transformation into material greed. Gatsby's pink suit and ostentatious lifestyle, juxtaposed against the sterile elegance of the Buchanans, emphasize the irony of his social aspiration and the artificiality of his success.

Thus, Fitzgerald's portrayal of Gatsby becomes both mythical and tragic. His hero, constructed from illusion and desire, collapses under the weight of a corrupted dream. The novel concludes with the recognition that ideal beauty and material wealth cannot coexist without destroying one another.

4. Conclusion

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* remains one of the most incisive critiques of the American Dream in modern literature. By intertwining social realism with lyrical symbolism, Fitzgerald reveals the profound moral decay beneath the glittering surface of the "Jazz Age." Gatsby's story transcends personal tragedy—it reflects a collective disillusionment with the ideals of progress, happiness, and individual success. Through this lens, *The Great Gatsby* endures not only as a masterpiece of American modernism but also as a timeless meditation on the fragility of dreams in a world dominated by illusion and desire.

F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896–1940) stands among the leading figures of the "Lost Generation," whose members—Ernest Hemingway, E. E. Cummings, and others—grappled with the spiritual aftermath of World War I. The war shattered pre-war optimism and faith in progress, producing writers who depicted the disillusionment of an age obsessed with wealth and pleasure. Fitzgerald, often called the chronicler of the "Jazz Age," painted a vivid portrait of America's transition into a culture defined by luxury, rapid social mobility, and moral exhaustion.

His works reflect the contradictions of this era: the pursuit of wealth as both a path to beauty and a source of corruption. As Radeljković (2005) observed, Fitzgerald "liked money; for him money was the means by which he could attain the romantic, alluring life of rich people, witty and beautiful women." Yet, beneath this fascination lies critique—the recognition that material success inevitably erodes human sincerity.

2. The Great Gatsby and the Modernist Vision

Published in 1925, *The Great Gatsby* embodies Fitzgerald's most profound critique of the American Dream. Its narrative structure—nine interlinked chapters, cinematic transitions, and an internal narrator—represents a departure from classical realism toward modernist experimentation. Nick Carraway's reflective narration offers both moral distance and

emotional empathy, capturing the duality of fascination and revulsion that defines the novel's social world.

The text reveals a tension between external brilliance and internal decay. Fitzgerald's language oscillates between romantic lyricism and biting irony, mirroring the instability of modern consciousness. Gatsby's world appears dazzling, yet every symbol—from the green light to the Valley of Ashes—exposes an undercurrent of despair and spiritual emptiness.

3. Visual and Linguistic Alienation: Gatsby's Duality

Gatsby's visual distinctiveness—his flamboyant pink suit and polished manners—marks him as both part of and alien to the world he aspires to enter. Fitzgerald uses this contrast to show that newfound wealth cannot erase emotional authenticity. Despite his riches, Gatsby retains a capacity for empathy absent in the cold detachment of the old aristocracy. Yet, even his servants mock him, reflecting his social displacement.

Language, too, reveals alienation. Gatsby's repeated phrase "old sport" betrays his origins, illustrating how speech becomes a marker of class and identity. The dream of assimilation remains incomplete; linguistic remnants of his past undermine his social transformation.

4. Naturalism and the Myth of Opportunity

Though Fitzgerald diverges from strict naturalism, he adopts its central motif—the decisive role of circumstance. Success, in this world, depends not on moral virtue but on seizing opportunity. Gatsby's admiration for Meyer Wolfshiem, who "just saw the opportunity," underlines the belief that cunning replaces ethics as the route to success.

Tom Buchanan, Gatsby's antithesis, represents the idle, racist, and intellectually barren elite. His monologue on racial supremacy—"Civilization's going to pieces... It's up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out" (Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 19)—reveals the hypocrisy of a class that fears moral decay while embodying it. Fitzgerald's irony exposes the fragility of a society built on inherited privilege.

5. Daisy Buchanan and the Feminine Ideal of the Jazz Age

Daisy serves as the emotional fulcrum between Gatsby and Tom. Beautiful yet shallow, she embodies both romantic allure and moral emptiness. Her decision to remain with Tom—despite Gatsby's devotion—illustrates the triumph of social security over emotional truth. Her remark, "What'll we plan?... What do people plan?" (Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 18), encapsulates the existential aimlessness of her class.

Fitzgerald's portrayal of Daisy reflects his conviction that women, confined by patriarchal structures, are denied agency in a male-dominated world. Her dependence and emotional vacuity mirror the broader moral paralysis of the privileged.

6. The Working-Class Tragedy: George and Myrtle Wilson

In contrast, George and Myrtle Wilson embody the desperate struggle of the working class. Trapped in the bleak “valley of ashes,” they dream of escape—George to California, Myrtle to Tom’s luxurious world. Both dreams end in destruction. George’s moral confusion drives him to murder Gatsby, unaware that they share the same aspiration for dignity and love. His suicide completes Fitzgerald’s bleak vision: in a capitalist order, moral individuals perish while the corrupt endure.

Myrtle’s tragic death—her body “mangled” under the wheels of Daisy’s car—symbolizes the annihilation of working-class hope. Her sensual vitality, described in her “faintly stout” figure and “smouldering nerves” (Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 31), contrasts sharply with Daisy’s languid fragility. Myrtle’s fate exposes the brutality of a society that commodifies desire and punishes transgression.

7. Symbolism and the Collapse of the Dream

The green light at the end of Daisy’s dock, visible from Gatsby’s mansion, becomes the central symbol of hope and illusion. It represents both personal longing and collective ambition. When Gatsby can no longer see it, he perceives the futility of his dream. The final confrontation—his death by George Wilson’s bullet—transforms the novel into a moral allegory.

The eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg, staring over the Valley of Ashes, serve as a haunting emblem of lost faith. They suggest divine absence in a world governed by greed and mechanization. The tragedy lies not only in Gatsby’s fall but in society’s indifference to it. Tom and Daisy retreat into wealth, leaving destruction in their wake.

8. Conclusion

The Great Gatsby crystallizes the despair of the “Lost Generation.” In Fitzgerald’s vision, the American Dream—once a promise of equality and progress—has decayed into a pursuit of wealth devoid of purpose. Gatsby’s tragedy mirrors the spiritual collapse of an entire civilization. He dies both literally and symbolically: the dreamer destroyed by his own illusions and by the heartlessness of those he sought to join.

Historically, the novel marks the end of 19th-century moral ideals and the birth of a modern world defined by uncertainty, mass culture, and moral ambiguity. Yet Fitzgerald closes with a glimmer of hope: “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 188). The green light endures as a fragile emblem of humanity’s eternal yearning for transcendence, even amid ruin.

Ethical Considerations

This article is based entirely on literary and theoretical research. No human subjects, personal data, or ethical risks were involved in its preparation.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest related to this study.

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